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M. L. MACKENZIE

A New Dimension for "Tam O' Shanter"

To suggest a new dimension for "Tam o' Shanter," probably the most frequently discussed of Burns's poems, is at this date an ambitious undertaking. Critics have long been content to classify the work as "a narrative poem," occasionally with the qualification that it "belongs to the well known *genre* of the Wild Ride, of which Byron's 'Mazeppa' is perhaps the best example in British literature."¹ The ride, however, is only one aspect of the poem. I propose to show that "Tam o' Shanter" follows in external details the *genre* of the mock-heroic, and that in several respects it echoes the techniques and even the incidents of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.

While the evidence for my argument must be demonstrated within the poem, there exists corroborative material from external sources, particularly from Burns's letters. Many references in his correspondence show that he read much epic poetry, at least in translation. "Thanks many thanks for my Gawin Douglas,"² he writes to a friend when the book is returned to him. And to another friend:

Dryden's Virgil has delighted me . . . I own I am disappointed in the Aeneid. . . . I think Virgil, in many instances, servile copier of Homer. If I had the Odyssey by me, I could parallel many passages where Virgil has evidently copied, but by no means improved Homer.³

In January 1789, he writes:

I muse & rhyme, morning, noon & night; & have a hundred different Poetic plans, pastoral, georgic, dramatic, &c. floating in the regions of fancy, somewhere between Purpose and resolve.⁴

Six months later he composed "Tam o' Shanter," no doubt the fruition of one of these "hundred different Poetic plans."

Specific resemblances, not necessarily borrowings, between "Tam o' Shanter" and *The Rape of the Lock* make Burns's familiarity with the

¹ Thomas Crawford, *Burns* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 221.

² *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), II, 315.

³ *The Letters*, I, 221.

⁴ *The Letters*, I 290.

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works of Pope a matter of some importance. Besides the quotations from Pope which appear at the head of several poems, at least nineteen references to, or quotations from, Pope, appear in Burns's letters. The quotations, drawn from many lines, and not merely the popular aphorisms, indicate a fairly wide knowledge of the whole of Pope's canon. The following remarks in a letter to a friend make clear what Burns's intentions were. He writes:

I very lately...wrote a poem, not in imitation, but in the manner of Pope's Moral Epistles. It is only a short essay, just to try the strength of my Muse's pinion in that way...I have likewise been laying the foundation of some pretty large poetic works.⁵

The poem alluded to above is, unhappily, not identified, nor is there evidence for the surmise that he appreciated Pope's jest, "Receipt to make an Epic Poem."

Reference to "Tam o' Shanter" itself clearly discloses mock epic characteristics. Without striving too laboriously to find a conscious application of the *genre*, on the one hand, or mere imitation on the other, the reader can be aware of the resemblances to an epic poem. Burns has adhered closely to Aristotle's precepts. "Tam" has fable, action, characters, sentiments, diction and metre, and the reader contemplates at one view the beginning and the end. The poet speaks in his own person as little as possible, and the intrusions when they occur, are limited to moral digressions similar to those delivered by the epic narrator. The surprising, the improbable and the incredible are all admitted, and the impossible which appears probable is preferred to the improbable which appears possible. Finally, neither manners nor sentiment are obscured by too splendid a diction.

Besides these general resemblances, "Tam" has close affinities with the epic in many particulars, similarities too exact to be dismissed as merely coincidental and which are matters of essence and not merely of superficial qualities.

The mock epic burlesques the characteristics of the classical epic, beginning generally with an invocation to the Muse. Burns does not invoke his Muse but he makes known her existence by regretting her inadequacy to describe the heights to which Nannie rose in her terpsichorean efforts:

But here my muse her wing maun cour;
Sic flights are far beyond her power:
To sing how Nannie lap and flang
(A souple jade she was, and strang). (ll. 179-182)

⁵ *The Letters*, I, 258.

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A formal statement of theme is another convention of the epic. Burns makes it clear in the first twenty lines that he will write of the dire, if grotesque, fate which will overtake his feckless hero on the harrowing journey of "lang Scots miles" from the tavern to his home. Just such a journey, fraught with dangers, is of course a theme of *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. The comment on the town, "Auld Ayr," is strictly in the epic tradition, as is the storm. Everywhere Ulysses goes there is a woman to minister to him. Tam is equally favoured:

The landlady and Tam grew gracious,
Wi' favours secret, sweet and precious; (ll. 47-8)

The epic has its story tellers. In Burns's mock epic, "The Souter tauld his queerest stories;" (l. 49). In epics, the Olympian deities direct the destinies of men. In "Tam," inexorable fate is the master of poor mortals:

Nae man can tether time nor tide;
The hour approaches Tam maun ride; (ll. 67-8)

With these words, the poem, begun conventionally in *medias res*, resumes the narrative.

The fable of an epic stresses the joy of recognition rather than the shock of surprise. Burns's fable is a folk tale that had become legend for miles around. As do events in true epics, the action in Burns's poem takes place on several levels, as the hero finds himself in Heaven, in Hell and on earth. The epic hero towers above all ordinary mortals, and is surrounded by men of stature comparable to his own. Therefore the mock epic requires an anti-hero. Burns rises to one of his best efforts here. His hero has attributes a king might envy; he is at times kingly:

Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious! (ll. 57-8)

Moreover in his utter drunkenness and superb madness when "Tam tint his reason a' thegither" (l. 189) he is a truly realistic anti-hero. Nor does he stand alone; his companion in countless campaigns is equally worthy:

And at his elbow Souter Johnny,
His ancient, trusty, drouthy crony;
Tam lo'ed him like a vera brither;
They had been fou for weeks thegither. (ll. 41-4)

Freedom of treatment is accorded to an epic poet to invent his own details and dialogue so long as he produces grandiloquent speeches, generally of a moral nature. Grandiose and moral, though ineffective is the first speech of Tam's wife, Kate, a comic Penelope, who sits at home awaiting the return of her lord:

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Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm. (ll. 11-12)
.... She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum;
That frae November till October,
Ae market-day thou was na sober. (ll. 19-22)

Kate very properly ends her exhortation in epic style with a warning and a prophecy:

She prophesied that, late or soon,
Thou would be found deep drowned in Doon;
Or caught wi' warlocks in the mirk
By Alloway's auld haunted kirk. (ll. 29-32)

The sustained formality of language requisite to the epic is found in the speeches in which Burns is pointing his moral. He piles up similes in carefully stated, neo-classical language:

But pleasures are like poppies spread—
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed (ll. 59f.)

and so on for the half a dozen lines of the catalogue. To take the place of the epic paean of praise, Burns gives his readers:

Inspiring, bold John Barleycorn,
What dangers thou canst mak us scorn!
Wi' tippenny we fear nae evil,
Wi' usquabae we'll face the devil! (ll. 5-8)

The bees which appear in Homer, Virgil, Spenser and Milton are not missing from Burns's poem. They appear twice. "The bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure" (l. 55) and again:

As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke,
When plundering herds assail their byke; (ll. 194-5)

and so on to the end of the simile. Important in the true epic are the four elements. Burns introduces these when he says:

Tam skelpit on through dub and mire,
Despising wind, and rain and fire—(ll. 81-2)

The epic journey has been mentioned as beginning the poem. Burns surely makes his as terrifying and horrible as any in the tradition. Even Satan's journey in *Paradise Lost* is not more graphically described than Tam's visit to the Alloway Kirkyard, which achieves its macabre effect from the variation Burns produces on the theme—Tam does not descend to the underworld; it comes up to him. The recitation of horrors to be found in the ruined church burlesques the catalogue convention of the epic, as Burns enumerates the series of frightful objects adorning the unholy altar.

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Nor does Burns omit the metamorphosis. Pope has the dusky Umbriel, Minerva-like, perch himself on a sconce's height to witness the battle in *The Rape*, where the reader's imagination metamorphoses him into a light. Burns, with more frightful invention, resorts to diabolical, rather than divine, apotheosis, as the corpses are transformed into the sconces or light holders:

Coffins stood round, like open presses,
That shawed the dead in their last dresses;
And by some devlish cantraip slight
Each in its cauld hand held a light. (ll. 125-8)

A true epic has a lofty purpose. In the climactic episode of both *The Rape* and "Tam" is found the lofty purpose which is made the supreme burlesque of each poet, similar as to subject, and at the same time ludicrously different, the rape of a lock of hair. In the first poem the charming Belinda is the victim of the loss of one of her delightful curls, while in the second "noble Maggie," Tam's grey mare, "(A better never lifted leg)," is bereft of her tail.

Prophecies come true in epic poems though usually ironically or partially. In *The Rape* only one half each of the Baron's boast and prayer is realized; in "Tam," half of Kate's prophecy is fulfilled. Tam is not drowned, providentially, but only "caught wi' warlocks in the mirk." (l. 31) An ironic moral is generally presented at the appropriate moment in an epic poem. Burns, in a fine dramatic climax, presents his ironic moral as a grave admonition in which both the hero and Maggie share the last words:

Think! Ye may buy the joys o'er dear
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.

These generic resemblances of "Tam o' Shanter" to the mock epic poem have been suggested by the devices it most conspicuously uses, without questioning that the poem is essentially a "verse narrative," and that it employs other devices than the mock epic. There is as much low burlesque as high in Burns's stanzas, as he describes the adventures of his drunken hero. And for this reason he uses not the high style of the heroic couplet, but the quick succession of rhymes of the octo-syllabic couplet, long favoured by Scots poets for narrative poems, and for popular poetry of the folk epic type, and is by turns rugged, pungent, grotesque, gruesome, tender and charming. His language is chiefly the colloquial idiom of the Ayrshire peasant of his day, interspersed with diction sufficiently elaborate and formal to burlesque the epic style.

No claim is made for "Tam o' Shanter" that it has more in common with *The Rape of the Lock* in poetic terms than the generic resemblances

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which have been indicated. The world of Belinda and Sir Plume is far removed from that of Tam by more than time and place. Each poem reflects with almost pictorial accuracy the society from which it comes, and each has its origin in universals. Appearance and reality are as deceptive to Belinda and the Baron as they are to Tam and his cronies, and to the epic heroes, and reason and emotion in one breast produce the same conflicts. Reflecting perhaps the temperaments of the two writers, the irony which pervades both poems is warmer and kindlier in Burns's work than in Pope's.

From the time of its first publication "Tam o' Shanter" has been recognized as one of the great narrative poems of literature. By pointing out a new dimension—the resemblance to the mock heroic *genre*—I hope however to enhance an understanding of the poem. "Tam o' Shanter" is not a greater work by this addition, but the thought that Burns may have had epic poems in mind, may produce further appreciation of the poem for the sophisticated reader. It would appear that the full originality of the work has not yet completely emerged. The poem is more than a verse narrative, and this new dimension heightens the effect in an already dynamic poem. So successful is Burns's fusion of divergent elements that "Tam o' Shanter" corroborates with greater intensity Carlyle's belief that Burns left "no more than a poor mutilated fragment of what was in him."

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